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ABSTRACT

The governing board of Arizona's Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) has developed a strategic conversations format to ensure interaction with the college community and continuous quality improvement in the governance process. The use of strategic conversations facilitates communication with the community to help understand issues facing the MCCCD and inform governing board decision-making. Strategic conversations are publicized as informal meetings of the college and external communities, in which everyone is encouraged to participate. Meeting topics are decided in advance by the governing board, generally after an electronic mail survey of the District. A brief presentation is made at the beginning of the strategic conversation and facilitators assist in guiding the discussion, which usually takes place in small, break-out groups. The use of strategic conversations has resulted in new institutional diversity policies; a new vision statement; a revised statement of mission, values, and goals; and a climate of open communication and inclusiveness at the MCCCD. Improvements in the strategic conversation process that have been made since its implementation include open seating during the meetings and flexibility in the format. A list of 10 positive results from and 6 barriers to implementing the strategic conversations format is appended. (TGI)

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American Association of Community Colleges
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Reinventing Governance: Maricopa Conducts Strategic Conversations

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LINDA ROSENTHAL, MARICOPA
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AACC
Monday, April 15, 1996

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for participating with us this morning. I have been a governing board member of the Maricopa County Community College District in Arizona for 16 years. We have 10 colleges in the greater Phoenix area which spreads over 9,600 square miles. Our annual student enrollment county-wide runs between 155,000 and 160,000 students in credit courses and another 30,000 in non-credit, continuing education courses. In addition, one of our colleges, Mesa, enjoys a partnership with Motorola University-West and more than 17,400 workers are enrolled in employee training programs.

Maricopa is, I believe, an institution that seems to be becoming more comfortable with change. We have mapped out for ourselves a very ambitious, aligned change agenda for the next few years. Our vision is that we will become a learning organization. We will

continually expand our capacity to create the results we all desire; we will nurture thinking and learning, and learn how to learn together. You will see in the illustration that one of our "vision enablers" or one of the processes and products by which we will achieve our vision is the Strategic Conversations of the governing board which is my topic today.

There are really two reasons why our District initially tried the strategic conversation format - one is the policy governance model and the other is the quality movement. For the past few years many community college trustees have become increasingly aware of a new governance model proposed by John Garver called the Policy Governance model. We have attended his presentations, read his books and discussed the many ramifications of the changes espoused by him. Whether or not boards have adopted the proposed model outright or adapted it to fit their needs, I believe one facet of it, if adopted, brings a

great deal of benefit to our colleges and satisfaction to us as trustees.

While the essence of the Policy Governance model is to rethink and rewrite board policies, the other part of the Carver model which was important to us is his belief that we as governing boards must frequently interact with our many communities to identify their wants and needs, which should translate into our actions and our policies. Carver believes that board members are the leaders and as such have the responsibility to act as the leaders.

Second, the Maricopa Community College District, has been involved in the quality movement for the past few years. The best part, from my perspective, is the insistence that continuous improvement is essential to every operation in order to be efficient and effective. Also, there is a real emphasis on listening to the customer. As I was preparing to become board chair in January of 1994, I began to rethink one of our board's two monthly meetings which we called a

study session. The purpose of these study session meetings each month was to present information on new or different items which would be coming to us at a later time for our action. Few external people came. Study sessions had become nothing more than show and tell sessions with reports sometimes being read to us, despite giving us a copy in advance, and perhaps a few questions being asked by board members to solicit further information or make a comment. In fact, the sessions were often very dull and no amount of tinkering over the years had improved them.

In the spirit of continuous improvement and an attempt to interact with our communities, a brainstorming session between a few of us (Donna was an important participant) resulted in the format for what is now called a Strategic Conversation. These have been held since January 1994 and with frequent evaluation and some changes they have evolved into successful and meaningful sessions involving both the internal and external communities.

The material we have given to you is our comprehensive "how to" manual, so you can replicate this concept yourself, and our topics schedules. I would like to highlight just a few points.

The stated purpose of the strategic conversation is three-fold. First, to facilitate communication among and solicit thoughts and ideas from a large number of people from the internal and external communities. Secondly, to reach a clearer understanding of issues facing the Maricopa Community Colleges. And, lastly, to help the governing board make important decisions. Up front, it is said that no decision will be made that evening, but the discussion will provide input to help make decisions at a later time.

The Strategic Conversation is publicized as an informal meeting where everyone is encouraged to participate. The board literally moved the meeting from the formal board room and its dais to the Employee

Lounge where everyone sits together. The year that I was chair, I issued invitations to members of the external community, and a special invitation to our internal family through electronic mail encouraging their attendance to provide us with input. At times I also sought their assistance for further input after a conversation was held.

Despite the informality of the setting, the meeting is structured so that everyone has the opportunity to participate and the meeting is meaningful. Three ground rules were established and are reviewed each time. First, have fun. Second, no rank in the room. Third, everyone participates, no one dominates.

The topics are decided before hand by the governing board, generally after an electronic mail survey of the entire organization. A different team of people are assigned to lead each conversation. They are asked to prepare a background paper which is distributed in advance, and then serves as a foundation for the discussion. The paper

presents the issues, questions raised by the issues, pro and con statements if appropriate, pertinent data and possible recommendations for future action.

The evening of the strategic conversation a very brief presentation is made and then facilitators assist in guiding the discussion, usually in small break-out groups, and recorders record the important points. These recorded comments become the meeting minutes which are distributed by electronic mail to our internal family and then become the official meeting minutes which are available to all when formally approved at a later regular business meeting of the board.

To illustrate how the results of Strategic Conversations later became governing board policy, I'd like to briefly discuss the process by talking about a newly adopted Diversity Policy.

One of the issues decided upon as a subject of a Strategic Conversation was entitled "Strategic Issues Associated with

Diversity." A team was formed with the specific charge to coordinate writing the paper, facilitate the strategic conversation meeting and then to make recommendations to the board for their consideration. The charge to the committee included the questions or issues proposed, all or part of which would become the focus of the conversation.

For various reasons, I became the chair of this resource team which we named the Diversity Continuous Quality Improvement Team. It was broad-based with representatives from all employee groups as well as all other ethnic groups, physically challenged, etc. The Team met several times, heard a couple of speakers, divided into sub-teams to work on parts and within a few months time collaborated on our background paper, and then facilitated and recorded the strategic conversation. Members of the Team were encouraged to invite community people to attend and provide input and they did. Despite it being Spring Break week, the subject was an important one and we had a

good crowd of enthusiastic participants from the community and our internal family. Some students also attended.

As a result of the small group activities, the background paper, the discussions the Team had and comments made at the strategic conversation, a final report was prepared for the board which included a new policy recommendation for their consideration. The new policy has now been adopted.

Several Strategic Conversations have resulted in new policies in addition to the Diversity Policy. The board has adopted a new Vision Statement, Mission, Values and Goals. As a consequence of open dialogue with both our internal and some of our external community members, these meetings have now become worthwhile and anything but dull evenings. Comments from participants indicate a great deal of satisfaction with these improved sessions and in the spirit of continuous improvement, we continue to seek feedback at the

conclusion of each conversation by a plus/delta and a feedback form.

The strategic conversation component has made significant impact on the culture and people of the Maricopa Community Colleges. It has definitely played a role in building an atmosphere of open communication and trust. The culture of MCCCD is becoming more inclusive. People feel they are being listened to and respected for their opinions and ideas and "things happen" - action is taken because of them. Public members appreciate that their ideas are actively sought. All of us appreciate that learning is occurring.

I would like to mention some of the improvements that we have made. It seems like a minor thing, but the room was originally set up so the board members and chancellor sat behind tables and the team in charge was invited to sit around the tables with us, and others filled in the remaining seats. This proved stifling and it soon evolved in to open seating, which certainly

helped the "no rank in the room" atmosphere we wished to create. This encouraged the small group discussions which have proved so productive.

Other lessons learned have included the need to be flexible, in that, sometimes an evening's conversation may not turn out quite as planned. Occasionally the resource team wants to be the experts and reverts more to the lecture format rather than the participatory format. Fortunately, this has happened infrequently. Also, sometimes the resource team has focused on a narrow issue which makes the conversation less productive. We now know that someone needs to check carefully into the work and progress of the resource team to attempt to assure a good outcome. In any case, some minor failures or disappointments in the long run contribute to our learning experience. For optimum results, the Governing Board and Chief Executive Officer must support the concept of strategic conversations. They must listen to the feedback given as a result of the conversations. The use of the variety

of talent in our organization to organize and facilitate the conversations in an informal atmosphere has resulted in a "fun" atmosphere and one that enhances learning, community, and respect.

Our model is really quite simple to replicate, and, in fact, our State Community College Board, a seventeen member appointed body, has recently done so by using our materials. I attended their first three conversations and there has been a good deal of enthusiasm with wide participation and satisfaction with their results.

In addition, one local school district invited us to attend their meeting and to brief them on our process. Some members then attended one of our strategic conversations and have decided to try it on their own.

In conclusion, I can truly say that I and many others in our organization look forward to the second Tuesday of most months when we have the opportunity to participate in a

strategic conversation. These evenings are now usually anything but dull.

In fact, this spring, we are using the format of the strategic conversations to discuss many additional issues at our colleges including obtaining input on the draft ends statements we developed for implementation of policy governance. We are finding that the second Tuesday of the month is just not sufficient for all the learning that Maricopa and its communities want to engage in.

It's exciting to be a part of this process.

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STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS

Notes for Presentation - AACC Annual Convention
April, 1996
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Positives

1. All discussions and presentations become much more focused.

2. We have been able to involve multiple levels of our organization in leadership roles in our Strategic Conversations -- allowing faculty, classified staff, and others to lead these conversations. People know a lot and have great skills. Strategic Conversations draw out these leaders and give recognition to them. Leaders learn, learners lead!

3. No decisions are reached, this permits the airing of more complex issues without committing to a decision. This facilitates a deeper understanding of issues and disaggregates complex issues into their parts -- a prelude to good systems thinking. If you want to go to systems thinking, Strategic Conversations are a good way to get there.

4. Strategic Conversations bring us back to the dignity of dialogue.

5. It promotes diversity. There is no rank. Assures that all ideas are represented.

6. These conversations are consistent with Margaret Wheatley's view of organizations -- that intelligence is generally equally distributed in an organization -- people should be sharing everything. We don't know how to talk to one another. Strategic Conversations allow for that. Our organizational culture is generally restrictive rather than open. Strategic Conversations permit real discussion, real conversation. The most important work in the new economy is creating conversation.

7. Strategic Conversation is one of the most important foundations for becoming a learning organization. It is a methodology par excellence on the way to becoming a learning organization.

8. This is a process we used to develop our vision, and review our mission, values and goals -- it was very inclusive. Visions become inclusive rather than leadership driven. The CEO is only one learner, participant, facilitator, partner.

9. It expresses our commitment to people - people are valued and smart. People take us where we want to go. It takes some of the burden off of more traditional leaders.

10. Strategic Conversations take the guess work out of where executive leadership is going -- allows everyone in the organization ownership.

Reservations

1. Loss of hierarchy. Some CEO's have trouble with this, the hierarchical behavior becomes very evident as to who participates and who doesn't. We must be ready to accept that the members of our organization will better facilitate and execute at times. There are many skill sets in the organization. Hierarchical leadership shunts some skill sets.

2. You have to be ready to move from a very closed information flow to something that is much more open. Strategic Conversations require an openness of style that some CEOs are uncomfortable with. We see this when new CEOs arrive in our system - it is a shock to some of them.

3. Strategic Conversations require the Board to make big changes, probably massive changes. Our Board spends more time in the audience than they do at the dais.

4. Some boards may not have had a Quality history or Quality foundation to facilitate these meetings. We use TQM tools to structure these meetings so they are productive - if not, you won't have much success. This takes more time - more staff -- more planning. Some of our staff begin their planning processes for their Strategic Conversations three and four months before the meeting. These Conversations are a well-planned and well-executed activity.

5. Some of the participants are bothered that there is not always closure after a Conversation. We are working on this and trying to find a system to come back and close the loop. We have started a new process. Following one of these Conversations, a report to the Chancellor and the Board is submitted by the team that planned the Conversation. The report states observations and any recommendations for action. (Use Business Services example). We are looking at improving this area.

6. It is important to have faculty involved, but it is not easy to tell whether the "heat seekers" or the broader faculty are involved. Who is participating?